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News Release



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Senior Regional Fish and Wildlife Scientists Recommend Sage-Grouse Not be Listed as Threatened or Endangered Range-Wide; Final Decision Yet to Be Made, Director Williams Says

Based on an extensive review of scientific data and analysis, senior regional U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologists have recommended that the Service not list the greater sage-grouse as a threatened or endangered species under the Endangered Species Act across its range, Service Director Steve Williams announced today.

The Service's regional directors and senior scientists this week completed the written scientific analysis and recommendation, which is currently being finalized by technical staff before being made available to Williams. He will review the recommendation before making a decision on whether to propose the species for listing by December 29.

"Our biologists have conducted a thorough review of the best available scientific information and, in their view, recommend that the greater sage-grouse does not warrant the special protections of the Act across its range," Williams said.

Williams said the best solution for conserving the greater sage-grouse is for federal agencies and western states to continue to support cooperative efforts to conserve and restore sage-grouse habitat.

"Together we have worked effectively with local governments, tribes, local communities, conservation groups, private landowners and other partners to conserve and restore sagebrush habitat that is vital to sage grouse and many other species," Williams said. "We must continue -- and wherever possible expand -- these efforts to achieve measurable, on-the-ground habitat conservation and restoration."

The Service received three petitions to list the greater sage-grouse range-wide as endangered or threatened. In April 2004, the Service announced that the petitions presented substantial information that listing may be warranted and began a full status review of the greater sage-grouse.

During the status review of the species, the Service is evaluating all the available scientific and commercial information on greater sage-grouse and their habitats, including all information provided by State and Federal agencies and Tribes, as well as information provided through the public comment process. The review of relevant materials includes the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies' Conservation Assessment of Greater Sage-grouse and Sagebrush Habitats issued in June 2004, which is a compilation of sage-grouse and sagebrush literature and data.

Currently, state fish and wildlife agencies have jurisdiction to manage greater sage-grouse. These agencies and federal agencies are developing conservation plans to address issues such as habitat loss, fragmentation, and degradation and to identify opportunities for habitat restoration and enhancement. Current sagebrush habitat is estimated at 100-150 million acres – 54 percent of historic acreage.

The Service is using a structured analysis process to evaluate the factors affecting greater sage-grouse populations and their sagebrush habitats. As part of this process, expert scientists from state and federal agencies and universities participated in a facilitated discussion on the biology and ecology of sage-grouse and sagebrush ecosystem. The scientists were also asked to apply their expert judgment to estimate the extinction risk for greater sage-grouse at various timeframes into the future. However, these scientists were not asked for and did not make recommendations on the listing decision. Their estimates and discussions occurred in the presence of a team of Service senior-level biologists in order to help ensure these biologists were aware of a diverse range of scientific points of view. The outside scientists included experts in greater sage-grouse, plant ecology, rangeland health, and invasive species.

Under the Endangered Species Act, an “endangered” species is in danger of extinction throughout all or a significant portion of its range; a “threatened” species is likely to become endangered within the foreseeable future. The ESA directs that the decision to list shall be made “solely on the basis of the best scientific and commercial data available....after taking into account those efforts, if any, being made by any State or foreign nation, or any political subdivision of a State or foreign nation, to protect such species.....”

Greater sage-grouse are currently estimated to number from 142,000 to 500,000 individuals. Sage-grouse populations declined an average of 3.5 percent per year from 1965 to 1985. Since 1986, however, populations in several states have increased or generally stabilized and the rate of decline from 1986 to 2003 slowed to 0.37 percent annually for the species across its entire range. Greater sage-grouse are currently found in Washington, Oregon, California, Nevada, Utah, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wyoming. They are also found in small populations in the Canadian provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan.

The greater sage-grouse is a large, rounded-winged, ground-dwelling bird, up to 30 inches long and two feet tall, weighing from two to seven pounds. It has a long, pointed tail with legs feathered to the base of the toes. Females are a mottled brown, black, and white color. Males are larger and have a large white ruff around their neck and bright yellow air sacks on their breasts, which they inflate during their mating display. The birds are found at elevations ranging from 4,000 to over 9,000 feet and are highly dependent on sagebrush for cover and food.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting, and enhancing fish, wildlife, and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million acre National Wildlife Refuge System, which encompasses 545 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resources offices, and 81 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign and Native American tribal governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Assistance program, which distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.